

# THE WEAPONIZATION OF TRAVEL TOOLKIT

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**Dealing with a Travel Ban or Boycott Around Your Event**



## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications



## ABOUT DESTINATIONS INTERNATIONAL

Destinations International is the world's largest resource for official destination organizations, convention and visitors bureaus, and tourism boards. Destinations International is about serving destination marketing professionals first and foremost. Together with more than 5,000 members and partners from nearly 600 destinations in approximately 15 countries, Destinations International represents a powerful, forward-thinking, collaborative association; exchanging bold ideas, connecting innovative people and elevating tourism to its highest potential.

## ABOUT U.S. TRAVEL ASSOCIATION

The U.S. Travel Association is the national, non-profit organization representing all components of the travel industry that generates \$2.4 trillion in economic output and supports 15.6 million jobs. U.S. Travel's mission is to increase travel to and within the United States. To do this, U.S. Travel advocates for policies that will advance and elevate the industry on the national level, while engaging members with the tools, research and resources needed to influence change at state and local levels.

## ABOUT MEETINGS MEAN BUSINESS

Meetings Mean Business is an industry-wide coalition to showcase the undeniable value that business meetings, trade shows, incentive travel, exhibitions, conferences and conventions bring to people, businesses and communities. By rallying industry advocates, working with stakeholders, conducting original research, engaging with outside voices and more, the coalition brings the industry together to emphasize its importance. Comprised of more than 60 members, the coalition was founded in 2009 by the U.S. Travel Association.

**This project was funded in part by the Destinations International Foundation.**

**For more information on the Foundation please visit [www.destinationsinternational.org/about-foundation](http://www.destinationsinternational.org/about-foundation).**

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications

# THE WEAPONIZATION OF TRAVEL

**In today’s political climate, travel bans and boycotts are increasingly popular tools for public officials, corporate leaders and grassroots activists to undermine the passage of controversial legislation. In Indiana, North Carolina and destinations across the country, meeting and event planners (MEPs) have been caught in the crosshairs. This toolkit provides messaging, materials and alternatives to help MEPs deal with a travel ban or boycott proactively.**

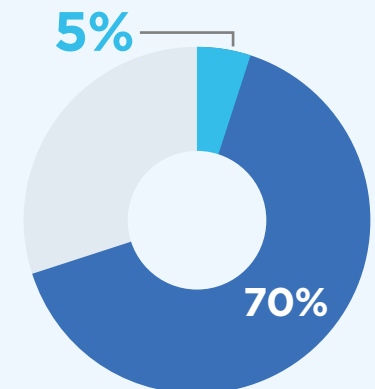
The weaponization of travel through meeting cancellations – and more broadly, the banning or boycotting of destinations – can negatively impact the local economy and hurt innocent bystanders such as travel industry employees in the process. As industry leaders, we are mindful of the unintended consequences these actions create and we know that determining if and how to respond is tricky.

When a travel ban or boycott emerges around an upcoming meeting or event, people naturally turn to MEPs for information and reassurance that traveling to a targeted destination is safe. In such circumstances, there may be little time for you to react; however, the first few hours of assessment and decision-making are among the most critical.

As a primary and trusted source of information before, during and after an event occurs, you have a platform to ensure event attendees not only feel safe, but also welcomed, updated and engaged. To aid you in this effort, the Weaponization of Travel toolkit contains facts, resources and best practices to help you prepare for, assess and respond to an issue around your event.

For the purposes of this document, and consistent with industry research, a travel ban is defined as a formal action taken by a business, state or local municipality or other entity to stop travel within its organization to a specific destination. Travel boycotts are defined more broadly, as efforts to discourage travel to a target destination.

**According to a recent survey, 70 percent of planners are familiar with travel bans and boycotts, yet of that 70 percent, only 5 percent feel “very prepared” to address them.**



## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

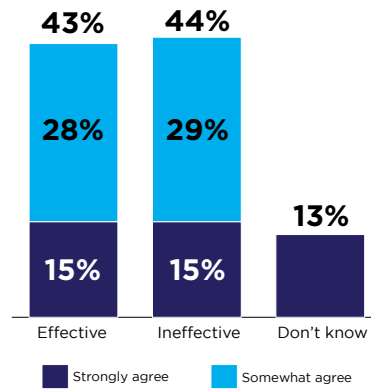
- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications

# THE IMPACT OF TRAVEL BANS AND BOYCOTTS

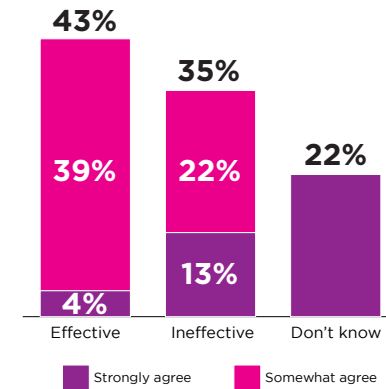
Travel bans and boycotts can have a considerable economic impact, however, their effect on policy is less consistent. In states like Mississippi and Arizona, federal courts, not policymakers, ultimately weighed in on the controversial legislation. In places like North Carolina and Indiana, backlash involving large businesses and organizations important to the state's revenue has resulted in formal policy change.

**These mixed results are reflected in the attitudes of travelers and MEPs, who are split as to whether boycotts are effective.**

**U.S. Travelers' Perceived Effectiveness of Travel Weaponization**



**U.S. MEPs Perceived Effectiveness of Travel Weaponization**



Americans agree that travel bans and boycotts cause substantial harm to local businesses and workers.

**7 in 10**

**U.S. travelers agree travel boycotts harm businesses and the hospitality industry.**

**MEPs agree travel boycotts and bans hurt innocent bystanders - local residents and businesses who rely on the meetings and events industry.**

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

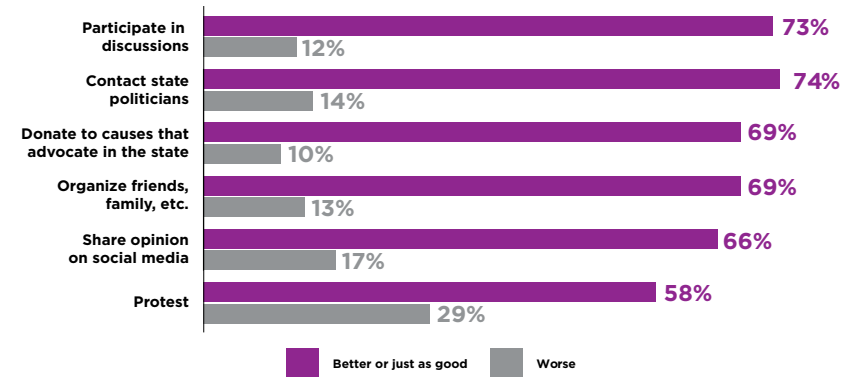
## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications

# ALTERNATIVES TO TRAVEL BANS AND BOYCOTTS

If it's not clear that the weaponization of travel is effective in changing policy, but does harm local businesses and employees, then are there other options? Both U.S. travelers and MEPs agree there are many viable alternatives to travel bans and boycotts.

### U.S. Traveler Attitudes toward Alternatives



### MEP Attitudes toward Alternatives



## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

This toolkit includes a suite of communications resources that can be localized and tailored for event attendees and other stakeholders, including your clients, vendors and organizational leadership. The resources were developed based on conversations and survey research among MEPs in 2018. They were also informed by relevant industry research and case studies.



**Planning and Preparation**



**Key Messages**



**Crisis Response**



**Sample Communications**

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- [Planning and Preparation](#)
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications



## PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Below is a list of actions to take BEFORE a travel ban or boycott arises. These actions may also be used to prepare for an event taking place in a destination that is currently being targeted.

### ► Engage trusted advisors, starting with organizations on the ground.

- Contact local partners to discuss an action plan for your event. Begin with the event venue, local Destination Marketing Organization (DMO), local Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) and/or neighboring hotels.
- For added insight and available resources, reach out to one or more industry associations. Depending on your affiliations, this may include:
  - **Destinations International**
  - **Meetings Mean Business Coalition**
  - **Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA)**
  - **Meeting Professionals International (MPI)**

### ► Ensure your media plans and processes are up to date.

- Assign roles in advance.
- Determine an effective media and social media monitoring process so your team has access to relevant coverage quickly.
- Establish a media intake process that can withstand a high volume of interest in an orderly fashion.
- Update your media lists to include local outlets and political reporters.
- Confirm that all contact information is correct and that you have a spokesperson identified.

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- [Planning and Preparation](#)
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications



## PLANNING AND PREPARATION (cont.)

### ▶ Discuss factors that could impact your organization's response.

- Consider the norms and political sensitivities at play, including whether your organization is likely to comment on the policy behind the travel ban or boycott.
- Talk about stakeholders' expectations of your organization, with a focus on your attendees.

### ▶ Develop messages and materials that are reviewed in advance by leaders in your organization.

- Create talking points and core communications to share information outlined in this toolkit with event attendees (and others as helpful).
- Leverage key messages and content from this toolkit to avoid starting from scratch.

### ▶ As appropriate, invest in information and tools that will make your organization's response effective.

- This may include media training or a crisis simulation with select members of your team.



## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- [Key Messages](#)
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications

## ✉ KEY MESSAGES

The following messages have been tested among MEPs in the U.S. who recommend, select and vet event destinations as part of their jobs. These messages are considered the most effective for informing key stakeholders about a travel ban or boycott and for contextualizing the actions your organization is taking to ensure a safe and successful event. They may be customized and adapted for a variety of communications, including emails, website content, talking points, press statements and social media content. For reference, we've included sample communications on pages 17, 18 and 19.

### **We do not support discriminatory policies**

nor will we support businesses that enforce them. We are committed to create spaces where attendees feel welcome and safe.

### **Travel boycotts and bans hurt innocent bystanders,**

including local residents, small businesses and travel industry employees who rely on the meetings and events industry.

### **There are better ways to influence policy**

that are less harmful and just as, if not more, effective, such as donating to advocacy groups or using a meeting or event as an opportunity to organize advocacy activities.

### **Meetings and events like ours are a way to bring people together.**

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- [Crisis Response](#)
- Sample Communications

## CRISIS RESPONSE

Because each situation is unique and requires tailored communications, below are tips for addressing a travel ban or boycott quickly and effectively. To determine the type of response that is most appropriate for your organization, start with the following key considerations:

### PRIMARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Safety and security implications for your event
- Questions, comments and concerns from attendees
- Volume of participation in the ban or boycott (scope and scale)
- Recommendations from local partners and industry association experts
- Political sensitivities and directives at your organization
- Potential backlash from activists, public officials, business leaders or others

### SECONDARY CONSIDERATIONS

- Media requests received by your organization or event
- Social media mentions of your organization or event
- Media coverage of the issue (broadly)
- Social media traction of the issue (broadly)
- Precedent for social advocacy at your organization

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**Note: Not all crises warrant a public response. If a ban or boycott lacks mass participation or broad stakeholder awareness, it may be more effective to monitor the issue and communicate updates “internally” among leaders in your organization, local partners and industry association advisors. The latter groups can provide valuable insight on individuals and organizations that should be engaged directly, including public officials, local businesses and relevant chambers of commerce.**

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Establish 3-5 triggers to avoid getting too far ahead of the issue and broadcasting a situation that attendees and others were either unaware of or unconcerned about. As an example: If more than 5% of your attendees reach out with questions or concerns about a ban or boycott, your organization may decide to move from individual responses to an all-attendee email.



## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- [Crisis Response](#)
- Sample Communications

## CRISIS RESPONSE (cont.)

Regardless of the approach you choose, it is important to continually assess the effectiveness of your communications and determine what adjustments need to be made. Crisis situations are fluid and can evolve quickly.

IF YOU DECIDE THE SITUATION WARRANTS A RESPONSE, use the following best practices for communications and outreach.

### ► **Overcommunicate with event attendees.**

- Don't leave them guessing or anxious for information. Being transparent and sharing facts is key. If a travel ban or boycott draws significant media attention, the likelihood that event attendees will seek information from MEPs increases dramatically.
- To ensure attendees feel safe and secure, it is critical to relay verifiable information quickly.
- Use digital and social media to push out messages across a variety of channels. In addition to email, website and social media updates from your organization consider other, creative ways to contact attendees.
- Ensure all communications are short, fact-based and easy for attendees to understand.

### ► **Provide viable alternatives, but don't demand advocacy.**

- Based on the situation, select one or more research-based alternatives that can be added to your messaging and materials. Alternatives may include:
  - Working with local partners (including the venue, local business community, DMO, CVB, vendors and suppliers) to ensure discriminatory policies will not be enforced at your meeting or event.
  - Announcing a public pledge or joint commitment from your organization and local partners to show support for inclusivity.
  - Adding a session focused on advocacy to the event schedule for interested attendees.
  - Scheduling a lobbying day for interested attendees.
  - Organizing a letter writing campaign or other outreach among interested attendees.

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- [Crisis Response](#)
- Sample Communications

## CRISIS RESPONSE (cont.)

### TEMPLATE ADVOCACY SESSION AGENDA

Overview: This session is an opportunity to talk about the news regarding [\[Insert policy name\]](#) and calls to suspend meetings and travel here, in [\[Insert destination name\]](#). We encourage those in attendance to share feedback and ideas on the policy as well as alternative actions to a ban or boycott. We look forward to an honest and respectful discussion among our [\[Insert conference name\]](#) attendees.

Welcome, 5-10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Opening remarks</li><li>• Ground rules – respect, relevance, reciprocity</li><li>• Key messages for MEPS</li><li>• Introduction of speakers and partners (if applicable)</li></ul>
Issue Overview, 10-25 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Presentation of key facts, topline news coverage and resources</li><li>• Featured remarks (if applicable, including a local industry voice and/or advocacy expert)</li></ul>
Action Planning, 20-30 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Small group discussions focused on advocacy alternatives and how to promote positive change, such as:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Announcing a public pledge or commitment to show support for inclusivity</li><li>• Organizing a letter writing campaign</li><li>• Scheduling a lobbying day for interested attendees</li><li>• Report outs</li></ul></li></ul>
Next Steps, 10 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Closing remarks – summary of discussion points and decisions</li><li>• Thank you</li></ul>

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- [Crisis Response](#)
- Sample Communications

## CRISIS RESPONSE (cont.)

### ▶ Ask for help.

- Look to local partners and industry association experts for guidance on responding to the media; providing resources to event attendees; and engaging with public officials.
- Reach out early and often to ensure the lines of communication are open and the effectiveness of your response is evaluated every step of the way.

### ▶ Carefully navigate the media and avoid wading into discussions about policy.

- Respond to media inquiries in a timely manner and in order of priority.
- Reach out early and often to ensure the lines of communication are open and the effectiveness of your response is evaluated every step of the way.
- Have one or more holding statements ready. Ensure that they are reviewed by leaders in your organization and as helpful, approved by local partners and industry associations.
- Whether your organization decides to engage in interviews and/or issue press statements, make sure someone is focused on following-up with reporters to correct any errors.
- Remember that politics today are unpredictable and highly partisan. Engaging in partisan debates, even among colleagues, can be risky.

This information tracks to recommendations in U.S. Travel's broader Crisis Readiness and Response guide, available for members [here](#).

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- [Crisis Response](#)
- Sample Communications

## CRISIS RESPONSE (cont.)

### Going beyond email: How to overcommunicate with your attendees



**Push notifications**, sent through an event mobile application, allow MEPs to send instantaneous and engaging messages to attendees. Much like text messages, push notifications appear on the home screen of mobile device and virtually cannot be ignored. Messages via push notification can be delivered to attendees regardless of wireless carrier or device.



**Facebook event postings** can be used in addition to, or in place of push notifications. Facebook event pages are a low maintenance and effective platform to communicate with attendees. They help to keep all pertinent information aggregated in one place, whereas email updates could get lost in the fray.



**Influencer communications** are an effective way to amplify key messages and communications from your organization. Consider recruiting trusted individuals and high-profile speakers and attendees to share or repurpose content you provide.



**Hotel communications** can help ensure that attendees have important information about the issue, including potential alternatives to participating in a travel ban or boycott. Engage major hotels where your attendees are staying to distribute materials or reiterate key messages.



**A dedicated email address (or helpline)** can also be useful, particularly if the volume of attendee questions or concerns escalates. Having a separate phone number or email will help your team delineate between general event inquiries and ones related to the ban or boycott.

## BACKGROUND

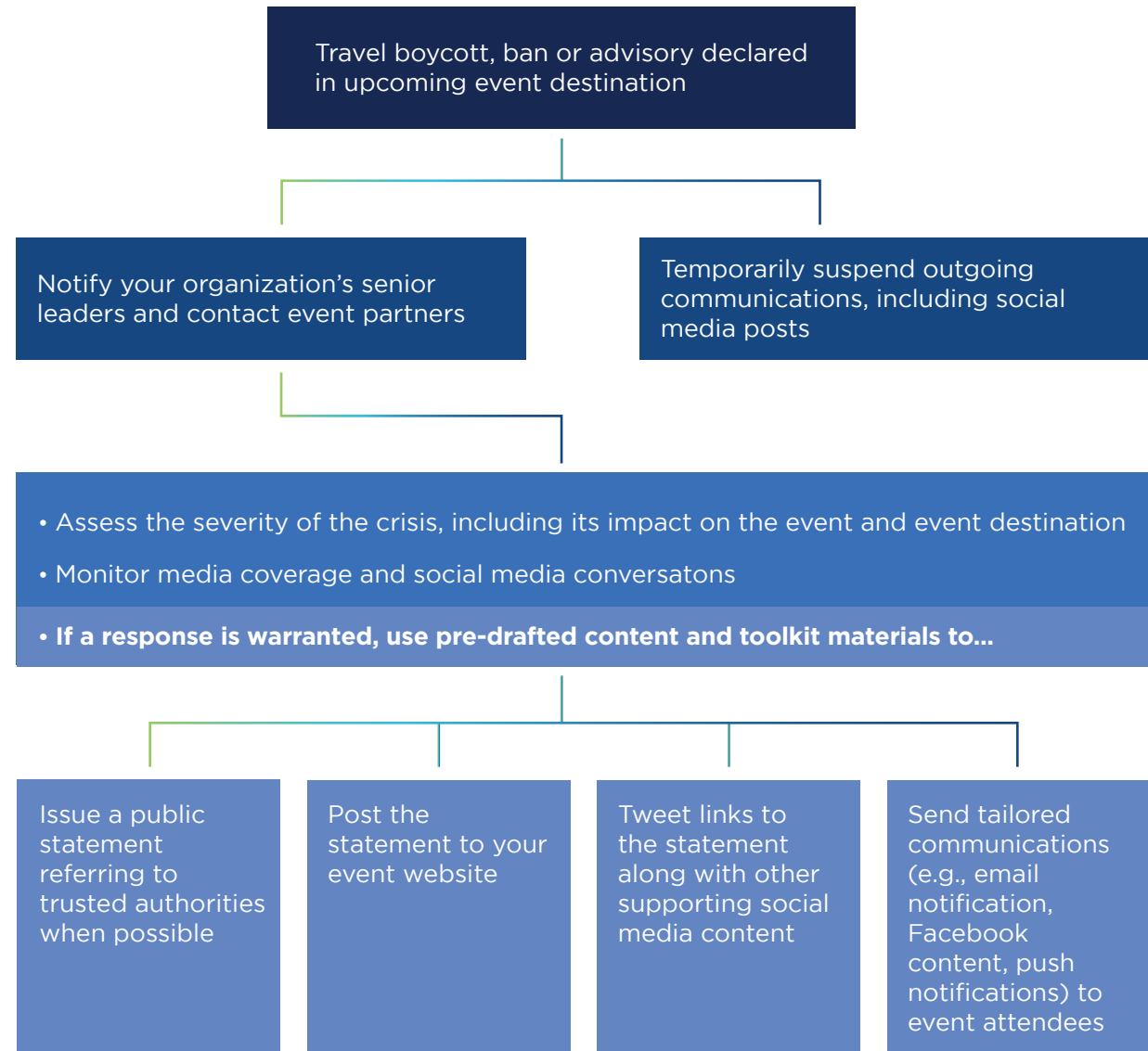
The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- Sample Communications

## CRISIS RESPONSE (cont.)

### The first 24 hours: How to get your messages out there





## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- [Sample Communications](#)

## SAMPLE COMMUNICATIONS

Short, fact-based communications are key. To demonstrate how the key messages translate to email, press and social media content, see below three template resources.

Of note: The social content, optimized for Twitter, can be used to engage registered event attendees, including ones who may already be aware of the travel ban or boycott without fully understanding its impact. As recommended in the best practices section, keep your content simple and direct. Avoid editorializing or excessive hashtags.

### EMAIL FOR ATTENDEES

Dear [\[Insert event name\]](#) attendees,

You may have seen the news regarding [\[Insert policy name\]](#) and calls to suspend meetings and travel in [\[insert destination name\]](#). With [\[Insert number\]](#) days until [\[Insert event name\]](#), I am reaching out to confirm that the event will take place as planned on [\[Insert event date\]](#) at [\[Insert event location\]](#).

I would also like to share what's happening behind-the-scenes:

1. As an organization, we do not support discriminatory policies nor will we support businesses that enforce them. We've asked that all businesses and staff supporting [\[Insert event name\]](#) commit to creating a space where all attendees feel welcome and safe. [\[Add specifics, as appropriate\]](#)
2. Meetings and events like [\[insert event name\]](#) are a way to bring people together. Sharing ideas, connecting and learning from one another – this is the foundation of [\[Insert event name\]](#). That's why we're working around the clock to ensure an open, hospitable environment from registration to check-out.
3. Because our industry is all about promoting diverse viewpoints and engaging on important issues of the day, we'll also offer an opportunity for those interested to [\[insert alternative to ban/boycott \(e.g., participate in a breakfast discussion about the policy on day two of the conference\)\]](#). This activity will be optional and designed for those who want to learn more about [\[Insert policy name\]](#) and how to influence decisions around the policy.

As the event day approaches, we look forward to seeing you at [\[Insert venue name\]](#). In the meantime, please reach out to with any questions or comments.

Best,

[\[Insert signatory \(e.g., organization CEO\)\]](#)

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- Planning and Preparation
- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- [Sample Communications](#)

## PRESS STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[Insert date; Insert name, title and telephone of your organization's spokesperson]

### **[Insert organization name] Keeps [Insert destination name] Meeting, Adds Engagement Opportunity Around [Insert policy name]**

[Insert event destination] - [Insert organization name] announced today that [Insert event name] will take place as planned on [Insert event date] in [Insert destination name].

Acknowledging recent calls to suspend meetings and travel until the policy, [Insert policy name], is revised or rescinded, [Insert organization name] also announced plans to [insert alternative to ban/boycott (e.g., host a breakfast discussion about the policy on day two of the conference)]. This activity will be optional and designed for those who want to learn more about [Insert policy name] and how to influence decisions by state legislators.

Additionally, [Insert organization name] asked that all businesses and staff supporting [Insert event name] commit to creating a space where all attendees feel welcome and safe. This includes [Insert relevant organizations or roles of individuals].

“As an organization, we do not support discriminatory policies nor will we support businesses that enforce them,” [Insert organization leaders' name] wrote in an email to attendees. “Like us, our venue partner, vendors and suppliers are dedicating to creating a space where all attendees feel welcome, safe and engaged.”

Event attendees are encouraged to contact **XXXX** for additional information, while media are directed to **XXXX**.

[Insert organization boiler plate language]

## BACKGROUND

The Weaponization of Travel

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

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- Key Messages
- Crisis Response
- [Sample Communications](#)

## TWEET SHEET

- We are committed to keeping [\[Insert event name\]](#) welcoming, safe + inclusive for all attendees. See our recent statement: [\[Insert press statement URL\]](#)
- Headed to [\[Insert event name\]](#)? Read our latest update for event attendees: [\[Insert press statement URL\]](#)
- Meetings and events like [\[Insert event name\]](#) are a way to bring people together. We are committed to providing hospitality + inclusion for every attendee. [\[Insert press statement URL\]](#)
- “We do not support discriminatory policies nor will we support businesses that enforce them.” - [\[Insert organization leader’s name\]](#) [\[Insert press statement URL\]](#)
- Hello, [\[Insert event name\]](#) attendees! Please be assured that [\[Insert policy name\]](#) impacting [\[insert destination name\]](#) will not affect our upcoming event. Our goal remains that everyone feels welcome, safe & included. [\[Insert press statement URL\]](#)
- Looking for information on [\[Insert policy name\]](#)? Check out resources from our industry partner [\[Tag local DMO\]](#): [\[Insert relevant URL\]](#)
- Travel bans and boycotts create unintended consequences for businesses and local communities. Learn more here: [\[Tag national association\]](#): [\[Insert relevant URL\]](#)